DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 581 UD 032 433

TITLE	Day to Day...Parent to Child. The Future of Violence among Homeless Children in America.
INSTITUTION	Homes for the Homeless, Inc., New York, NY.
PUB DATE	1998-01-00
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Homes for the Homeless, 36 Cooper Square, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10003; phone: 212-529-5252.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Early Experience; Economically Disadvantaged; *Educational Attainment; *Family Characteristics; *Homeless People; Low Income Groups; *Parent Child Relationship; Parents; Poverty; Training; Urban Problems; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS	*Shelters

ABSTRACT

The majority of parents now living in homeless shelters, typically young single mothers with one or two children under the age of six, have spent their lives spiraling downward through a complex and self-perpetuating cycle of family violence, community violence, and poverty. Sixty-three percent of homeless parents, a survey has found, live with family violence as adults, and 70% of homeless parents experienced family violence when they were children. Worse yet, today's homeless children will likely follow in their parents' footsteps when they grow up. Until society provides and prioritizes violence intervention and access to the basic education required to eliminate the need for reliance on an abuser, homeless shelters across the country will continue to see a stream of future victims and abusers, dependent on emergency services for survival. The plague of family violence does not distinguish between rich or poor, but its impact is most devastating on the poorest of the poor, families who live doubled up or in shelters with few options other than dependence on an abuser. Programs offered in shelters that integrate violence awareness and independent living skills into a structured learning environment succeed in reaching both the identified and unidentified victims of family and community violence. These programs can ensure that more parents and children learn to recognize violence, gain life and job skills, and develop the self-esteem necessary to walk away from abusive situations. Shelters can become places in which families learn to substitute the pain and frustration of violence with an educational investment in themselves. (Contains two figures and two tables.) (SLD)

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Institute for Children and Poverty
Homes for the Homeless

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Day to Day . . . Parent to Child

The Future of Violence Among Homeless Children in America

January 1997 . . . Laura, 23, walked down the long shelter hallway, leading her two small children by the hand. She had just been released from the hospital, and was afraid to go home; her boyfriend, Danny, would be there, probably still drunk and angry from the night before. But she had nowhere else to go. "How did I end up back in the shelter?" she wondered. "And where can I go from here?"

Fact: Today the fastest growing segment of the homeless population is made up of families, many of whom are the victims of violence. More important than what lies ahead for Laura is what lies ahead for her children.

Laura's story is shared by hundreds of thousands of homeless families who grapple each day with the fear, pain and instability of violence. A recent study of 439 homeless heads-of-household in New York City found that *sixty-three percent of homeless parents lived with family violence as adults.* Moreover, *seventy percent of homeless parents experienced family violence when they were children themselves.**[1] (See Figure 1)

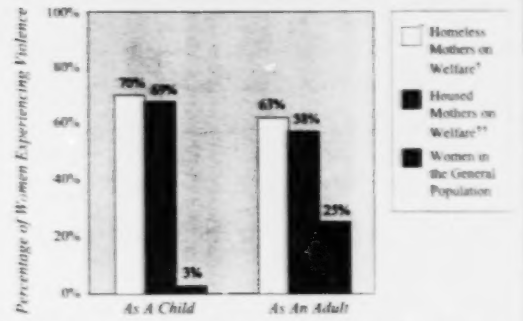
The majority of parents now living in shelters—typically young single mothers with one or two children under the age of six (See Table 1)—have spent their lives spiraling downward through a complex and self-perpetuating cycle of family violence, community violence and poverty. The anxieties, discomfort and limited options of poverty fed family violence in their former homes; family violence itself played an equally powerful role in nurturing their continued poverty and homelessness by obstructing the paths to self-esteem and self-sufficiency critical to achieve stability. These struggling families also were forced to contend with violence in their communities—violence that is likely both the precursor to and the successor of violence in the home.

Table 1: A Profile of Homeless Mothers Who Experienced Violence as Children or Adults

Characteristics	Homeless Mothers
Average Age	26
Average Number of Children	2
Marital Status	
Single	86%
Married	5%
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	9%
Ethnicity	
Black	62%
Hispanic	30%
White	3%
Other	5%
Education Level	
Less Than High School	57%
High School	28%
High School Plus	16%

Source: Institute for Children and Poverty

Figure 1: Experiences of Violence: Homeless Mothers, Housed Mothers on Welfare, and Women in General



Source: American Medical Association, Better Homes Fund, Richard Gelles, Institute for Children and Poverty

Eighty percent of homeless mothers have experienced family violence at some point in their lives—seventy percent as children and sixty-three percent as adults.

Worse yet, today's homeless children will likely follow in their parents' footsteps when they grow up. They will inevitably find themselves entangled in a web of violence, poverty and homelessness, cut off from the educational opportunities that could open the door to escape. Until we recognize the destruction family violence wreaks on the community as a whole and take responsibility for ending the violence—by providing and prioritizing violence intervention and access to the basic education required to eliminate the need for reliance on an abuser—homeless shelters across the country will continue to see a stream of future victims and abusers, rendered dependent on emergency services for survival.

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* "Family violence" as it is used throughout this paper refers to emotional, physical, or sexual abuse experienced at the hands of a family member or partner, including continuous criticism and insults, physical assault and weapon-induced injuries, and sexual molestation and rape. Although these findings are specific to New York City, anecdotal and statistical evidence indicates that they are indicative of violence among homeless families across the country.[2] † Includes physical, sexual and or emotional violence committed by parents, relatives, partners or friends. †† Includes physical or sexual violence committed by caretakers, other household members or intimates.

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September 1995 . . . Laura had always lived with violence. She remembered how when she was young her father would lash out at her mother, and often at her. When Laura moved in with her boyfriend after the birth of her daughter at 17, she learned to avoid his fists by not arguing over the money he used for drugs. Laura feared for her baby—not just because of her boyfriend, but because she worried that one day she too would lose control of her anger. When she found herself pregnant again in the fall of 1995, she moved out and into a homeless shelter.

Fact: Seventy percent of today's homeless parents experienced family violence as a child.

Violence Among Parents: The Cycle Begins

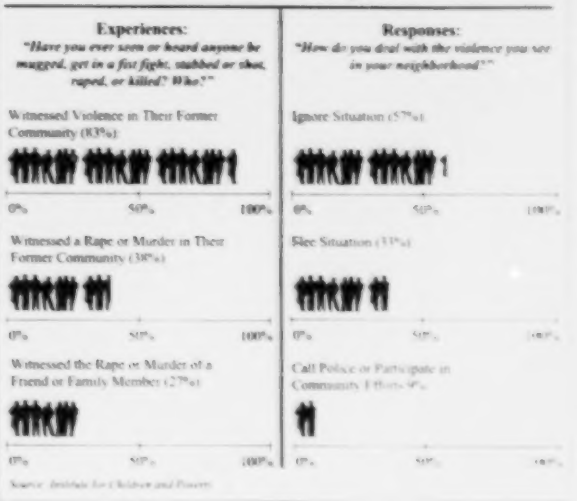
Violence has been the constant companion of today's homeless parents, most of whom were introduced to abuse at a young age. Seventy percent of homeless parents experienced physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse from a parent or relative as a child, and sixty-three percent reported involvement in violent relationships with friends or partners as adults. In all, eighty percent of homeless parents experienced family violence at some point in their lives.

While poor communities do offer support to families experiencing problems in the home, individual expectations of family and community life are often distorted by a veil of community violence. Eighty-three percent of homeless parents witnessed violence in their former community, including fist fights, muggings, stabbings, shootings, rapes and murders. Of those who had witnessed a murder, *sixty-two percent* saw a friend or family member killed; of those who had observed a rape, *sixty-seven percent* witnessed the assault of a friend or relative. (See Figure 2) While it may not be surprising that the poor communities in which today's homeless parents lived were wrought with high rates of violence, the picture of day-to-day life that emerges from these findings—one of pervasive violence in and outside the home—is shocking. These parents had few periods of relief in which to address the obstacles—poverty, under-education and unemployment—that prevented them from escaping abuse.

Poverty and Homelessness: The Root and the Fruit of Violence

The violence that has plagued today's homeless mothers throughout their lives is tightly woven into the fabric of the poverty in which they live, each strand inextricably bound to the other. The intentional restrictions that all abusers—partners, mothers, fathers, siblings, or even housemates—place on their victims to keep them dependent are particularly detrimental to individuals short on the skills necessary for self-sufficiency. Abusers sabotage education or employment pursuits by refusing to take responsibility for getting children to school or daycare; turning off alarm clocks, making victims consistently late; shredding interview or work clothing; and even beating victims the night before an interview.[4] While these efforts do not regularly succeed in maintaining allegiance to the abuser, they do consistently succeed in preventing victims from achieving long-term independence and stability by making it impossible to attain the education and work experience necessary to be self-sufficient.

Figure 2:
Community Violence Among Homeless Parents: Experiences and Responses



While family violence prevents parents from attaining the skills they need, the lack of financial and social resources resulting from poverty not only blocks their escape from violence, but ultimately entrenches them even more deeply in the mire of poverty and dependence. With neither friends or family with whom to stay, nor the education or employment opportunities to earn the money for rent, poor families have few paths out of abusive situations: they can either turn to a domestic violence shelter or stay at risk. Many choose the latter. Those who do make the move often find the domestic violence shelters full; their only option is to enter the emergency shelter system for homeless families. Indeed, *domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness around the country*. Nine percent of homeless heads-of-household cite domestic violence as the primary cause of their homelessness; this figure climbs to twenty-seven percent when one includes those parents who cite arguments with people they lived with as the cause of their homelessness, arguments that may point to unrecognized family violence situations.

December 1995 . . . Searching for a new apartment was not easy. Laura feared for her children's safety in the neighborhoods she could afford; though she had lived in such areas all her life, she never got used to the sounds of gunshots. Then Laura started dating a man who lived in a not-so-bad neighborhood and said that she and her children could move in with him. But Danny proved no better than her last boyfriend.

Fact: Twenty-seven percent of homeless mothers saw the rape or murder of a friend or relative.

Once family violence sends families into homelessness, community violence prevents them from escaping. Limited low-income housing availability reduces homeless families' options for relocating. Often they have no choice but to move into a violent and dangerous neighborhood with little community support or even to return to the abuser's neighborhood where they are again at risk. While neither of these situations is a realistic solution for a family seeking safety and stability, the simple fact is that there are rarely alternatives.

Scripting the Future for the Next Generation

The restrictions and hardships of poverty and violence not only entrap parents, but also jeopardize the next generation. Study after study has shown that the majority of children whose parents experienced abuse are themselves abused or seriously neglected.[5] The likelihood that homeless children will be abused is increased not only by the high rate of abuse among their parents, but also by the overwhelming pressures of homelessness. As a result, nine percent of homeless families have lost at least one child to foster care, and eleven percent have an open case of child abuse or neglect with child welfare authorities.

Individuals who experience abuse or neglect as children are likely to repeat those roles in their adult life. Research indicates that children who are abused are far more likely to become victims or abusers as adults than children who grow up without violence in the home.[6] The parents of today's homeless children already have fulfilled this prediction:

March 1996 . . . One evening Laura accidentally knocked one of Danny's half-empty bottles off the kitchen counter. It shattered, littering the floor with spilled liquor and broken glass. Tina, her four-year-old, shook her head. "You've been bad, Mommy. Now Danny has to punish you."

Fact: Children who live with violence in the home learn to accept it as the norm.

those who experienced violence as children were forty-three percent more likely to be involved in abusive relationships as adults than the parents who reported no childhood violence. Worse yet, children do not have to be the victims of abuse for violence to take hold of their futures: having simply *witnessed* violence in the home is a strong predictor of future victimization or abuse.[7] In fact, some researchers have found that boys who witnessed violence by their fathers had a 1000 percent greater rate of battering than those who did not.[8]

Contact with violence in the home is just part of the legacy of violence already passed on to homeless children; they also face the same constant violence in their community that their parents did. In witnessing this violence, they see not only the destructive action take place, but also equally destructive passivity: fifty-seven percent of homeless parents reported avoiding any involvement when they saw violence taking place; only five percent said they called the police and even fewer—four percent—said they responded by getting involved in community efforts to prevent or fight violence. (See Figure 2) The response of their parents—rooted perhaps in fear, or perhaps in desensitization to frequently observed violence—shows the next generation that violence is acceptable.

Although early intervention can stave off this grim vision of the future for today's homeless children, the disruptions of poverty, homelessness and violence already have taken their toll on the single hope these children have: education. By the time their parents have reached the depths of poverty and violence and ended up in homeless shelters, sixty-two percent of homeless children are reading below grade level, seventy-eight percent are performing below grade level in math, twenty-four percent have been placed in special education, and thirty-seven percent have repeated a grade.[9] Unless the cycles of poverty and violence are broken for both parents and children, and the gateway to a better future opened, these children will bear their legacies of violence, dependence and poverty throughout their lives.

Stopping the Violence . . . *Starting a Life*

The plague of family violence does not distinguish between rich or poor. Yet its ultimate impact is most devastating on the poorest of the poor—families living doubled-up or in shelters with few options other than continued dependence on an abuser. Worse yet, families now make up the fastest growing segment of the homeless population across the country. As their numbers grow, so does the number of children growing up amidst deepest poverty—tomorrow's adults trapped within cycles of poverty and violence.

Researchers have estimated the annual cost of domestic violence to the nation at $67 billion in labor force, child well-being, housing, social services, health care, and criminal justice.[10] Indeed, few community institutions would deny that family violence can no longer be viewed as a private matter, but must be incorporated into the public agenda. Yet even fewer are prepared to take responsibility for the multifaceted educational approach necessary.

Programs offered in shelters, community centers, or schools that integrate violence awareness and independent living skills into a structured learning environment succeed in reaching both identified and unidentified victims of family and community violence. Such programs work with both parents and children, incorporating discussions of violence, parenting and independent living into nontraditional classrooms and providing referrals to counseling as necessary, or linking domestic violence counseling participants to continuing education. Through this approach, they ensure that more children and parents learn to recognize violence and its debilitating effects, gain the life and job skills that will prevent them from needing to depend on a batterer, and develop the self-esteem necessary to walk away from abusive situations.

As the number of homeless families continues to rise, the relationship between violence and homelessness is becoming more visible. With more and more families residing in shelters, the opportunity to tackle the abuse, neglect and violence hindering them is at hand. Shelters can become places where families learn to substitute the pain and frustration of violence with an educational investment in themselves. By re-envisioning shelters as centers of learning rather than emergency waiting rooms we can begin to break the day to day, parent to child cycle of violence, homelessness and poverty.

Table 2: Day to Day...Parent to Child

Among homeless parents . . .
- 70% experienced family violence as a child;
- 63% experienced family violence as an adult;
- 80% witnessed violence in their former neighborhood; and
- 76% of those who experienced violence as a child also were involved in abusive relationships as adults—43% more than those who experienced no violence as a child.
- 57% never finished high school.

Among homeless families . . .
- 11% have an open case with child protective services; and
- 9% have a child in foster care.

Among homeless children . . .
- 78% perform below grade level in math;
- 62% read below grade level;
- 37% have repeated a grade; and
- 24% have been placed in special education.

And for all children . . .
- A 1000% greater rate of battering among males who witness violence committed by their fathers.

The Cost...
- Thousands of women and children in battered women's shelters;
- tens of thousands of children placed in foster care;
- hundreds of thousands of individuals seeking medical, police and legal services; and
- over a million families dependent on welfare and homeless shelters.

...$67 billion annually nationwide

June 1997 . . . At the shelter for the second time, Laura started attending education workshops. Here she worked on her reading and writing skills—not just with textbooks like she had the last time she was in school, but by learning things like taking care of an apartment, being a good parent, holding a job, and dealing with "family violence." Within six months, Laura had earned her GED, and had broken all ties with Danny. When she found a job and an apartment, she knew that she was there to stay.

Fact: Unless families are presented with alternatives to living with violence, the next generation will continue the cycle of poverty and abuse.

Notes

1. From a survey conducted with 439 homeless family heads-of-household in New York City, July 1996.
2. E.L. Bassuk, L.F. Weinreb, J.C. Buckner, A. Browne, A. Salomon and S.S. Bassuk, "The Characteristics and Needs of Sheltered Homeless and Low-Income Housed Mothers," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 276, no. 8 (1996); L.A. Goodman, "The Prevalence of Abuse in the Lives of Homeless and Housed Poor Mothers: A Comparison Study," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61 (1991); S.P. Redmond and J. Brackman, "Homeless Children and their Caretakers," *Homelessness in the United States*, ed. J. Momeni (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990); D. Wood, R.B. Valdez, T. Hayashi and A. Shen, "Homeless and Housed Families in Los Angeles: A Study Comparing Demographic, Economic, and Family Function Characteristics," *American Journal of Public Health* 80, no. 9 (1990).
3. Experiences of violence among homeless mothers. Homes for the Homeless, New York, NY, 1996. Experiences of housed mothers on AFDC. Better Homes Fund, Worcester, MA, 1996. Violence among the general population as children. Richard Gelles, "Family Violence," *Family Violence: Prevention and Treatment*, ed. Robert Hampton (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993) p. 15. Violence among the general population as adults. American Medical Association, 1992.
4. J. Raphael, *Prisoners of Abuse: Domestic Violence and Welfare Receipt* (Chicago: Taylor Institute, April 1996); C.T. Kennes and K.R. Brown, *Report From The Front Lines: The Impact of Violence on Poor Women* (New York: NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, 1996).
5. M.M. McKay, "The Link Between Domestic Violence and Child Abuse: Assessment and Treatment Considerations," *Child Welfare* 123, no. 1 (1994); State Justice Institute Conference, "A Guide to Research on Family Violence," *Courts and Communities: Confronting Violence in the Family* (San Francisco, CA: State Justice Institute, 1993), p. 27; M.A. Straus and R.J. Gelles (eds.), *Physical Violence in American Families*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990); P.H. Zappardino and D. DeBare, "In Search of Safety: Double Jeopardy for Battered Women," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 8, no. 1 (1992).
6. National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, *Statistics Packet, 3rd Edition* (Philadelphia, PA: 1994) pp. 122-145.
7. A. Browne, *When Battered Women Kill* (New York: The Free Press, 1987) p. 31; National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, *Statistics Packet*, pp. 122-145.
8. M. Kenning, A. Merchant and A. Tomkins, "Research on the Effects of Witnessing Parental Battering: Clinical and Legal Policy Implications," *Woman Battering: Policy Responses*, ed. M. Steinman (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson, 1991) p. 238.
9. R. Nunez, *The New Poverty: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Insight Books/Plenum Press, 1996).
10. L. Laurence and R. Spalter-Roth, *Measuring the Costs of Domestic Violence Against Women and the Cost-Effectiveness of Interventions: An Initial Assessment and Proposals for Further Research* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, May 1996) p. 2.

Homes for the Homeless (HFH) is the largest operator of *American Family Inns*—residential educational employment training centers—for homeless families in New York City. The **Institute for Children and Poverty** is HFH's research and training division. Homes for the Homeless' facilities include:

Clinton Family Inn (New York, NY) *Prospect Family Inn* (Bronx, NY)
Island Family Inn (Staten Island, NY) *Saratoga Family Inn* (Queens, NY)

Clinton Family Respite Center
Prospect Family Respite Center
Saratoga Family Respite Center
Camps Kiwago, Lanowa & Wakonda (Harriman State Park, NY)

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